

Cornelius Skeahan
interviewed by Jaime Lopez

- Jaime: This project in some sense is ... You know how we have conversations on the job and we speak to workers and we ... On the side, while we're working, we have these communications that we do and we get to know each other. A lot of the times when we leave the jobs, the partner leaves us, we get this ... We come apart. Those conversations and those stories get lost somehow. [00:00:30] This project is somewhat honoring those conversations that we have and honoring that process. If you would like to start by telling us your name and your job title.
- Cornelius: My name is Cornelius McClellan Skeahan. That's my full name. Currently my job title is shop steward for business representative, Anthony Fallio, obviously in local union number 3 IBEW.
- Jaime: And can [00:01:00] you tell us your background? What's your background? Where were you born? Where are your parents from?
- Cornelius: My mother, we have to check her genealogy but we believe she may go back as far as the Revolutionary War, her family. She's from Manhattan. I was born in Manhattan. My father's first generation. His parents came over from Ireland. Again I was born in Manhattan at St. Vincent's Hospital. That's no longer St. Vincent's Hospital. [00:01:30] It's now residential apartments, just recently also. We're from New York. We moved out to Queens, and then we went out further out East on Long Island, and that ... All my formidable years were based in Long Island. Began my education in public school system. For my high school years I did attend St. Anthony's High School in Kings Park, which since has moved.
- Jaime: [00:02:00] And where do you live now? What's your neighborhood?
- Cornelius: Now I live in Commack, still on Long Island. When I met my wife Marcy, I was living on the upper East side, back in Manhattan. Thought I would never commute again, and then I met her and she lived on Long Island, and so I am back on Long Island, happily. Although I could do without the commute some days.
- Jaime: And what are some of your hobbies?
- Cornelius: Well my main one outside the job, I would say that I still play ice hockey. [00:02:30] I love it. It's good therapy. To sound corny, though, I will tell you that spending time with my wife, and my family, my nieces and nephews, it's just a good time. And my wife and I married late in our lives, first marriage for both of us. We have a couple of dogs, and our family's as crazy as us with the animals. So those two go everywhere with us, but that's kind of more my life than hobbies. [00:03:00] Really it's hockey and staying in tune to the labor

movement. I don't find it a burden. I find it exciting to not face the difficulties, but to be aware of where we need to go or where we should go, so reading current events and history, takes a lot of my time also. I would say if I was to look back on the three major things I do ... If there's three there, I believe [00:03:30] there's three. That's where I think I am.

Jaime: I want to ask you about past jobs that you've had before you came into the industry. Can you tell us about some of your more memorable jobs?

Cornelius: You know, they're all memorable to me. I'll say I picked up a paper route from one of my friends in my neighborhood. He's an older guy. Still my friend to this day. He was four years older, but I took the paper [00:04:00] route from him when he went off to college, and I only did that for a short period of time. At 16 I began working in a delicatessen, and I really enjoyed that job. I enjoyed the counter time. I enjoyed the people that came in, because you met an awful lot of different type of people, and dealing with the public and their demands can be stressful at times as a young kid if you're taking things very seriously. It can be pretty funny when you break away from it, and you discuss it with the [00:04:30] other employees later, the situations and circumstances that came up. But I spent six years at the deli. Six of ... No. No about four years.

Then I had just done some construction in the summer when I was in between college. I had gone to college for two years before coming into Local 3. I had gone to Courtland State University.

Jaime: What did you study?

Cornelius: I was ... Political Science and Health.

Jaime: Okay.

Cornelius: Then that's something [00:05:00] that attracted me right away, was just government and it's an important issue in everyone's lives, how we're governed. So that just ... I had an attraction to that immediately.

Jaime : Right. And how did you make your transition? Is that when you made your transition into Local 3?

Cornelius: Yes it is. I was actually in between ... I had taken a couple civil service exams, and the NYPD ... I had begun what they call is the investigation. I had been on my investigation with the NYPD [00:05:30] and also had begun the process for entering Local 3. Taking your oath into Local 3. And I remember distinctly, and I talk about it to the younger kids and to my peers on the job. It was during the summer, and I probably embellish a little bit, but I came home from the beach and within the same week there were two letters in the mailbox and one said, "Come in for your swearing in for NYPD," and "Come in for your orientation for Local 3." [00:06:00] And here I was, home for the summer from college, and

knowing that both of these questions would come, I would face sooner or later, I didn't expect on a summer day returning from the beach. But as we see today, I gladly chose Local 3.

Jaime : How did you make the choice? How did you make the-

Cornelius: My family members were all in the labor movement. I have two of my older cousins were in Local 3, retired. I come from a labor [00:06:30] family. My uncle was the treasurer for the brick layers, local union number one. And my father was in utility, he worked for Edison, and he finished his career with the phone company. My grandfather was a longshoreman on the West side of Manhattan. And my mother was in the school system, and then she was involved in the union politics there. So it was just ... It's in our family to be concerned for workers.

Jaime : Right. Do you have any other family in the business?

Cornelius: I have [00:07:00] my cousin's son that is in now. He just turned out. I think he picked up is A card within the last six months. But as far as pure blood, he's the one. He's the one.

Jaime: Can you tell us what type of work you're doing now?

Cornelius: Well, I'll say I just left the World Trade Center, just this week. And I was down there for the last three years. It's in its final phase of raw construction, [00:07:30] as far as building one, One World Trade Center. There's a few commercial buildings. Building four is complete, with some lease space still needing to be worked on. But that was a power job, for me where I was. I was there as a shops ... In the capacity of shop steward. And that was the power. The power comes from the Port Authority, or it goes to the Port Authority from the utility, and then it's distributed amongst the site. So my [00:08:00] position there was just to follow the power, and who's handling it, and as a worker. Being on the job, installing conduit-

Jaime: Okay.

Cornelius: And the logic ... Currently now I'm on a more commercial phase job I just entered over at 28 Liberty Street.

Jaime: Can you tell us about the Trade Center? And what the energy and what the space feels like when you walk into work? Can you describe some of the sights and some of the things that are happening?

Cornelius: I will. [00:08:30] I will. All of it may not be complementary, but I'll be as honest as I can without sounding too critical.

Jaime: Okay.

Cornelius:

It's the World Trade Center site. It's called a memorial. There's a lot of commercial enterprise there that can take you away from the idea of memorializing the event of 9/11. When it was a construction space, the workers had somewhat more ... Were regarded [00:09:00] better. It's now a public space, and we tend to be rather ... Performing our work and not being seen. But we do have rights to walk through the site. It is now a public site. The Oculus is open. All the retail stores are going. I think you can look at it so many different ways. Because of the event that brought it to where it is, the Trade Center site, the 16 acre site, to where it is today, you have tourists. Tourists [00:09:30] come in, and there's a lot of emotions in their expressions. You can see it. They get on line for the memorial outside. They want to go to the top of One World Trade. They want to come into the Oculus and do some shopping.

And then there's us, the workers. And we're in our PPE, personal protective equipment. We have our hardhats and our vests on, and our glasses, and we're walking through the site going from whatever project. We have to move around between during the day, moving material. There's [00:10:00] a lot that goes on there in a day, and now it's interesting. But the transition from the old Trade Center that's most drastic to me, really, because it was always a tourist site. Now we have a forceful presence there, an armed presence. We have armed police. We have a military there. And everyone is on watch. And it's definitely [00:10:30] a sign of our times, for lack of a better way of saying it. I mean, we have armed guards walking, and they're armed to the hilt. Something that you're more accustomed to seeing in third world countries, where you go and like for Mexico for instance, the Federales.

It was the first thing that hit me when it became a public space. Once it went from construction to a public space, the authorities moved in, and understandable. We have a lot happening here in case of terrorism, but that's part of the atmosphere that strikes [00:11:00] me the most. The work that's been performed there, it's impressive. In a short period of time, for something that had to be designed almost on the fly. Obviously the grand design was there, but as they say when the rubber hits the road, there's some changes. I can say that the work that was performed by those workers there, is impressive. It's art. A lot of it is art from all the pipework by the trades, the mechanical [00:11:30] trades that do pipe, the structural steel. There's just a tremendous amount of pride that went into that work.

And if you go to ... Not the general public can get there, but a worker can get there, to the spire for instance, on top of One World Trade Center. And there's a documentary on it that most people have seen. Any worker that got up there, got there and put their name or their family members' names, some of them may have perished in 9/ [00:12:00] 11. Local Three has names etched into the steel of the spire, and it's just quietly done, but it's for our own comfort I guess, ease in participation.

Jaime:

Over the years, as an electrician, what kind of work have you been doing? And what are the most memorable jobs?

Cornelius:

It's definitely a diverse industry. You can pigeonhole yourself to a certain [00:12:30] type of work, whether, just to be quick about it, it's just data, and you like that type of work. One of the quotes in our industry is I like to do pipe. We hear that from a lot of members, and pipe is art. It's great, and so is low voltage work. When you dress cables, and in a data panel or a data board. All of it is a skill, and it's acquired skill. Some people are naturally artistic and neat, others learn it as they move along and they improve their skills they go along. [00:13:00] My favorite jobs ... There are all so many to hit. I'm in 33 years, you know? And I don't know if it was always the type of work. I think it was the people I met. The people you meet come from the same walks of life, different walks of life, different experiences they come from when they come into the industry, and how they approach the work, and how they approach situations or circumstances that you come into.

You know, as an apprentice, [00:13:30] you just revere the people that are in the business, because they're going to show you something that you don't know. So as an apprentice, there was some fun jobs, there was some serious jobs ... As an MIJ, that would be the first job that really left an imprint on me. You know, I don't want to leave anything out. It's funny. You start to feel like you may leave something out. And I don't want to give too many personal experiences about myself, but I will give this one as an apprentice, interesting [00:14:00] point about our industry. Very good point.

I was new on the job. I was a third year apprentice. We were drilling floor cells in this building. I think it was 130 Liberty Street. Floor cells are when you drill through the concrete on the space, and underneath is a cable tray that's covered with concrete. You drill into that cable tray and you put in that to set in, and then you pull cable up. And that gives you your floor receptacles. So I had just come from another shop, and I was rotated into this company. And that other company, I was doing similar work. [00:14:30] So I was sitting in the middle of a barren floor. And we just drilled. And the inserts can be peeled back for the different levels of pour in the concrete. There can be a four inch pour, or a three inch pour.

So I was sitting there and I was peeling back the insert on the perforated ridge. And I was sitting down. And the foreman is marching through the job, and he marches by me and he stops dead in his tracks. And he starts, and he looks at me, and he asked me what am I doing? [00:15:00] In a strong voice. I was like, "Oh no. I just came to this job yesterday. What could I be doing wrong? Am I sitting?" And I go, "I'm just peeling back the perforations on the insert because the deck is more shallow than the can." And he starts to yell across the floor, and I thought he was going to ... It was coming out at me. And he actually yells, he goes, something to this effect, "Look at this!" He goes, "I'm in the business 30-something years. I've been a foreman this long, and I just learned something from a third year apprentice."

Jaime:

Yeah.

Cornelius: So the interesting this is that [00:15:30] there is so many facets of our industry, you may not see it all, no matter how many years you've been in. That someone like him, the example there, was that he wasn't ashamed, or embarrassed, or intimidated. That there was something he just caught on to. That he's in other details and never saw that. So an interesting point, you know?

But if I had to go for a favorite job ... Again, I was a foreman at Goldman Sachs for a few years. It was tiring. [00:16:00] It was too many hours. I thought at times it was a condition-breaker, because there were too many hours, but there were good people involved in that. It was fun. I worked for a good outfit called AllCom Electric. It was a good outfit for me. Everyone has their own interpretations of their companies they worked for. The air train that connects the airport to Jamaica station and runs to all the terminals in John F. Kennedy Airport, JFK. That was a good job. [00:16:30] It was good people, good crews on that. The work went in, as we say, the work went in. You can't have fun and have work installed, but we do. We do have fun and have work installed. Sometimes it seems like there's less fun today than there was yesterday, but I don't know. That could be seen through different ... Through aged eyes, through experienced eyes, and younger eyes. You know? The air train was good.

And you know, I was in all these jobs in different capacities. [00:17:00] When I said I was at Goldman, I was a foreman. When I was on the air train I was a journeyman. And then I became a shop steward. And that was by chance. Later on maybe I'll tell that story, but now I'm in a shop steward's capacity, and I find this frustrating but productive. I think it's where I ... I know it's where I want to be right now in my career. And I feel [00:17:30] fortunate that I am.

Jaime: Could you explain a little more about what are some of the frustrations? But what are the possible productivity points?

Cornelius: The frustrations are that ... Organized labor has been under attack successfully. There have been diminished workers' rights, there has been stagnant wages, stagnant salaries for middle [00:18:00] class people. And it's ... The people that are involved, we get it. And the frustration is you feel that there starts to be a sense of apathy, and I think it's throughout the nation no matter what you do for a living. If you're in that middle class or what was middle class, you're finding a frustration, you feel that maybe you're voice is diminished. And where [00:18:30] I am and with the people that I'm with, we feel we have the answer. We feel that everyone works for a living, so why wouldn't everyone have legal representation, or want it? And it would better your life? And in a very simplistic statement, maybe some of the war-torn nations, the ones that aren't fighting for democracy, but the ones that are fighting internally for one thing or another, if people have jobs, it's pre-occupying from other issues maybe in a sense. [00:19:00] If you have a job that you feel constructive, you feel a part of society that's positive. And if you don't have a job, or you're fighting at a job that's not satisfactory whether it's in wage or even if it's a job you like, society runs into trouble.

So the frustration I think is when we as the believers of the labor movement talk about it and sometimes it will [00:19:30] fall on ... I think it's such a simple answer, you know? It's frustrating. And I say, "Why can't everyone get it?" But that can be a very narrow focus. That's strictly speaking from someone with a labor background. But again, I always revert back to that. Everyone goes to work every day. You must love or like what you do, and it's never really work. The frustrations are that we're not recognized and we do feel like we're pushing a large boulder up a hill [00:20:00] that is picking up weight as we go along, and it's not getting easier.

And I think we were all raised ... At least after World War II and the Great Depression. We were raised to believe that each generation would progress to something more ... Easier? I don't know if luxury is the word. But that life would be less vicious and less hard, and it doesn't always seem like [00:20:30] that. And maybe it's always been like that since the beginning of time. You have to read more history.

Jaime: So something along the lines that the next generation should be better off than your generation?

Cornelius: Exactly.

Jaime: I think that's what families strive for. You do state there are productive points. And where do you find those productivity points?

Cornelius: When you see the workers on a job that may not be that active in the labor movement, but they come to work [00:21:00] every day and they're diligent about their job. And they're proud of their work. And that's when I say, "Let's take it to the next level." But that's maybe asking more than I should. It's when you get a young kid, to hear one word you said. And that's all you ask. And I know that sounds like a cliché, but that's all. You know what? Pick up one thing. Pick up something, and hold onto that and then an individual can build upon that. So when you see that even if I speak at a safety meeting [00:21:30] or a club meeting, someone will come up afterwards and say, "That was a good point."

And that makes me feel like if I'm researching a report I'm about to give for a safety meeting's information afterwards, that's a feeling of productivity. It's a feeling that all right, we're moving in the right direction. Something was said that can be used I hope. I guess ... Yeah. Think of more.

Jaime: [00:22:00] So keeping along the lines of being a shop steward, and some of your responsibilities, but also some of your skills you need to do your job. What are some of your skills needed to be a shop steward specifically?

Cornelius: First one is discretion. By far. You're out there. You're a representative of the members of Local 3. Which includes the shop, you're [00:22:30] immediate

boss, you're business representative, who you work for. You're representing his or her, and in my case it's his ... I'm his voice out in the field right now. And it's not completely autonomous. There's much I go back and check with. You know say, "We're up against this. What's the best way to go about it?" But that all falls under the definition of discretion. It was interesting. Just a young helper was talking to me today at lunch, specifically about stewardship, or [00:23:00] being a steward. And she said, "Is there ever anyone you ever really ripped into?" And I said, "You know what? I'll be honest with you. Ashamedly yes." I said, "And I bet a shop steward wouldn't." I said, "That's not what we're here for." I said, "There were times when you shouldn't let your emotions get the better of you. There's some things that you may see as plain as day and they don't."

And maybe after some discussion it can become frustrating, but you can't go at someone right out of [00:23:30] the gate over something that they may not be educated on or they may not even see. In my instance, there was only two. And I was honest with her. She asked honest questions, she gets an honest answer. And I said, "I'm not proud of those moments." And she goes, and she asked me if I apologized. And I said, "I did." I said, "I went back and I said this is how we want to be. That's how we want to carry ourselves. I didn't in that manner, and I want you to know that I stand corrected on that." [00:24:00] And one was in front of a crew, and the other was just on the side. It wasn't in front of a crew. So I had poor discretion in those instances, but I think that's what it is, is not to let your emotions get you in a time when they will.

To know the rules, so you speak ... It's almost like being an attorney in some cases. A contract attorney, because you need to know the rules, [00:24:30] you need to explain them. And many times in simple layman's terms. You need to know legalities and be able to convey that to the membership, because they're maybe going to a class at night or pipe-bending class or they're not ... The role of the shop steward takes on a different capacity in the industry. It's almost like a guardian in this sense, and so you have to know the rules and regulations. You have to know where [00:25:00] the limits are, and understanding that everyone has a different approach, a different disposition, a different character. So how you talk to people is a gift. And I think it's one that the shop stewards I see all have it. You can't approach everyone in the same manner. You have to be able to quickly read what the situation is, what the individual is.

And they're not catastrophic instances all the time, you [00:25:30] know, circumstances. There could be very simple things. It could be just explaining to an apprentice something simple that just that you wanted to explain something to them. No examples come to my mind immediately, just that one story that just happened today.

Jaime: What about something on the more extreme side?

Cornelius: Would it consider like safety, I guess?

Jaime: It's up to you.

Cornelius: Extreme meaning?

Jaime: Meaning the other side. Something from simple to something more complex.

Cornelius: [00:26:00] There could be something as simple as an apprentice ... And a journeyman, any member of our industry especially, because that's first who I'm going to look out for. But all the trades unions equally but, I have influence, a little influence over our members. I'm going to say a simple thing like speaking in the elevator. Okay, speaking the way I was raised in my household that let's remain private of things that we need to straighten out, [00:26:30] fix, discuss. We don't need to broadcast our personal issues. So in the elevator sometimes an apprentice ... And all of a sudden the apprentices, they want people to feel they're in the know. They're an apprentice. It's hard to be spoken to all day and not speak up, especially in today's society. Everyone wants to have a voice.

You know, I've had instances where apprentices speak on the job, and they speak uncomplimentary of maybe the company, maybe someone on the job, [00:27:00] of anything. And I'll get them. I'll follow them off the car. This is a number of times. It's not a pandemic in our industry. You take one aside and you say, "Look. Listen. We don't conduct our business on an elevator. There's too many people on and off the car. The conversation goes out of context, and people move on from there, and they misconstrue what you may have been wanting to say. Other instances you may be saying something that I don't want you to say, [00:27:30] and you may be saying something that's incorrect because you are young in the business and you may just be regurgitating something from someone you heard. So all those taken together, I'd rather you not speak in the car, and if you have something to say that's judgmental about our industry, for as young as you are, see me first. I am available to listen to what you have to say."

And the same thing goes for journeyman. I've walked up to a car with some journeyman and I said, "Listen. That's not correct. And I'd rather you not [00:28:00] bring it up on the car. Okay?" So that's something small, but to me that can snowball quickly, because we're selling our product, and that's our representation. How we represent ourselves, how we carry ourselves, is the product we sell. We want to be professionals, and that's something that was instilled in me by the journeyman when I came in. I was nurtured and spoken to, because far from being perfect, there was probably things I said at times and I'm glad I don't remember them, but I can remember that the [00:28:30] journeyman was not happy. And it was probably due to some ignorance, and wanting to be a part of the industry and not ready yet to be a spokesman for the industry. You know?

On the other side of the coin, we deal with harassment. We deal with intimidation, and I think those are extreme. I think those are extreme because the foundations of unionism to me, the basic tenants should be inclusion. So if there's intimidation or harassment, [00:29:00] you're practicing a form of exclusion. You're trying to push back on someone who's here to do a day's work,

get a day's pay, and return tomorrow and perform that task again, and again, and again.

So extremes for me would be those times where I've been involved in cases of harassment and intimidation, coercion. Whether it's a slight remark that someone in a different culture saying in front of someone from [00:29:30] another culture, doesn't realize how damaging it can be, or insulting it can be. They can actually believe they're complimenting that person, or including them. And it's interesting how that can come off. And that one is a difficult one to explain to people sometimes. But you have to, and that's the discretion. How are you going to explain it to this person? Do you go at them and say, "Listen, you're not here to intimidate. Would you intimidate them [00:30:00] on the line at the grocery store? Or are you intimidating because you have a position? Are you speaking to them like that?" And the off-color remarks that are meant to be joking can be very, very insulting to people, so you really have to be conscious that we're not just laying out work and performing construction, but that we are building relationships. We're not tearing down relationships. We're building relationships.

Perfect examples? It's hard for me, because I do generalize things and unless I have a story, [00:30:30] and I really don't have a story. Maybe I missed it. Maybe something I missed.

Jaime: So these sensitivities that you developed, have you always had that? Or was it something that grew?

Cornelius: I'm told that it was something I always had. I think it was my dinner table. My parents at home. I guess ... They [00:31:00] instilled it in me, as simple as that. I mean, we would discuss that bullying doesn't work, and being aware of your surroundings. I was never perfect at it, by far. My younger days, I did not come out perfect. Far from it today too, but it started at home. And I think I honed it in this industry. I think this industry allowed me to sharpen that foundation that was given to me by my parents and my family life. [00:31:30] Because of all the circumstances that we come across, they're all just interrelationships. You know, the work is the work. And the work is installed more productively, and better, when there's more harmony on the job. And that's just a fact.

Jaime: Right.

Cornelius: You could just go down a line and you can see the character of a job, and you can say, "This job has a tension to it. An unnecessary [00:32:00] tension. I don't know where it's coming from." And you may try to figure that out sometimes. And other jobs you walk on, and you could smile as soon as you walk in the door. You're like, "What is going on here?" That there's an atmosphere, and I just left a job that had a very good atmosphere. I think something like that can come from the company, because no matter what at the end of the day, we're all Local 3. We're Local 3. The workers day in and day out are at their jobs, [00:32:30] so they deal with the shop, and some of that can come down from

the shop, the character. A shop that has a good character from the top, does come down well to the workers. And I think sometimes when you get that tension, it can be from either side. Maybe the workers' side, and maybe the office side, and I don't want to get too far into that, that ain't my goal for it.

Jaime: Could you tell me about your coworkers?

Cornelius: Again, 33 years I have no regrets. The people I've met along the way, everyone I've met along the way, I'm speaking personally here obviously, I took away something from them, something good. I really did. There's people that I didn't get along with and I guess that's [00:33:30] just human nature. I'm really gonna speak on a personal level here.

Jaime: Please do.

Cornelius: But there was just something, and I guess that came from my home too. But I'm gonna find something, maybe it's being naïve, but everyone has something to add. You're gonna ... and I guess even if it's something, a negative force or a negative disposition coming from someone, you can take away something positive from that for yourself. You can say that's definitely how I'm not gonna approach that condition ever [00:34:00] again. I watched how that went down it didn't go down too well. But I think that again our industry is relationships. It's electrical industry, it's installing work properly and harmoniously with everyone else. But it's about relationships. You're gonna - interesting thing - you and I can be best friends. And we can actually see someone completely different.

And I've come across that so many [00:34:30] times an issue where you have a good friend and they may have had a different experience with someone than you did and they're really polar experiences. And it's an interesting phenomenon that I learn, I get now, but I didn't get when I was younger in this business. Like how can these two guys not really like this person? I don't see anything yet. But then you go through your career and just different circumstances arise and somethings are uncontrollable and we should all see each other the same way, [00:35:00] but it's not gonna happen because outside stimulus may have just affected that moment. But again, you can be best friends with someone and see a third person, the two of you can look at that person completely different. So the question was ...

Jaime: I'll rephrase it. Is there anybody you can recall, special relationship that you built in this industry?

Cornelius: Yeah. When I was a second year apprentice, first year [00:35:30] apprentice, there was a man that came to the job and he was a Vietnam vet and he had some cognitive challenges and he was perpetually in one point of the industry he was never gonna graduate from to the next point. He came in every day, but you could see he was just a little stressed. He had some difficulties, [00:36:00] socially, and he wasn't violent. He was just struggling. And I said... man... and the foreman moved him on, and that bothered me. I was like this guy is a Local 3 member, find a spot. The guy tried every

day, we gotta... Even then I said he's not a troublesome individual. He came in every day he just was, he was never gonna be more than [00:36:30] a young man than a very young person that suffered something traumatic in the war. What I learned was that he was a radio operator in Vietnam. He was PTSD. Post stress ... what is it? Post traumatic stress disorder. PTSD. That's what he was suffering from.

And I said the foreman shipped him off the job after like two weeks, didn't even give him half a chance to find something for him. Too busy to ...completion of the job. And I just said to myself, [00:37:00] I wish if I ever see him again and low and behold was I a sub foreman at the Navy Yard for LK Comstock and here comes Smitty. And he says to me, I says Smitty how are you? It's me, Neil Skeehan, he goes "Yeah. I'm not Smitty anymore I'm TJ. " And I said okay. TJ now is clean but he was still where he was those [00:37:30] 15 years ago when I met him. So I was able to put him with another great Local 3 guy, a very active guy, Adam. Adam stayed with TJ for the remainder of that job. And I thought that was great, because I don't know if there's any other industry you can do that cause I don't work in any other industry, but I had seen it done before in our industry and I said.. I was able to do that. And it was done for me another time, it was done for me once too. But [00:38:00] that's what I say about the relationship, so that was a nice story. Hope it was [00:38:07] cogent.

Jaime: Have you ever passed down a tool, or had a tool passed down to you?

Cornelius: Funny. I did. I ... you know what? [00:38:30] Not in a real traditional sense no. I can't say I was part of that.

Jaime: So before we came in we had talked a little bit about tradition and told me one of my favorite tradition is the retiree tradition. How we get a limousine for the guy or gal and we have a proper send off of that journeyman or woman. Can you think of any other traditions that you hold dear to your heart?

Cornelius: Well I want to agree with you. I think that the [00:39:00] tradition of retirement is important. You have a member that put in 40 years and this is that individuals last day on the job, or even if it's a retirement dinner. But lets say the last day on the job. I've been on a few jobs where there was a big deal made about a guy that was leaving, a guy or girl it was gonna be their last day. And it was nice, because that individual is going on to the next step of life and I'm sure there's [00:39:30] a lot of emotion there. You're going to some uncertainty you're not gonna do what you did for the last 40 years. But the tradition of acknowledging someone's retirement, everyone should be a part of someone's retirement one time or another if you aren't. I will say that sometimes I'm disturbed or annoyed when I see some people say well I'll try to make it. I'm like, try to make it? The person had to have an influence on you. How can you not acknowledge them? This is it. You won't see them again. [00:40:00] Likely they're going to retire and you don't see people that you worked with six months steady for.

You don't see them once we all go to new jobs for the most part. Where you're gonna see people again and again is if you're an active member in the local three clubs in our fraternal organizations. But that retirement is just the acknowledgement that you put ... and individual put their time into an industry and now they are truly passing off the

torch. They won't [00:40:30] be doing anymore on the job for us. So everything that ...you can't take anymore away from them. You may get a couple stories if you see them out once in a while, but I find it important that everyone ... there was one guy that he retired and even the job didn't do anything for him. Even again, I said to the apprentice bring in some coffee in the morning, cakes and coffee in the morning. And the guy was humbled by it. And it was [00:41:00] just the little group that we were in, but I just don't see how someone can leave the industry and ...if they don't want the acknowledgement, and there are members that really don't want the acknowledgement. You know there's a fella in the Brooklyn club and he didn't want to be acknowledged. He was like you know what I'm just gonna retire and go off quietly. And that's fine, that was his choice. I would try to push a little bit you don't want to embarrass anybody or call them out, but retirement is a culmination of your lifetime of work and if we can acknowledge that in the smallest way I think [00:41:30] that goes a long way for that person. I remember that last day on the job more than anything else, probably their first day and their last day on the job is indelible on their memories, so it has to be something.

Jaime: Is there anything else tradition-wise that you admired or that you think of in Local 3 that you like or maybe practice?

Cornelius: It's well ... I use the word [proselytizing 00:42:00] [00:42:00] but you know, speaking to ..talking with... relevance in the industry, I became disappointed for a while and that is a tradition. It's a tradition that in some cases have gotten away from us for the majority of the people, but for that group that remains active and positive about the labor movement and want to see its perpetuity, [00:42:30] we talk about relevance, and you can speak enough. When I was an apprentice I wanted to be around journeyman. I didn't mind, hanging out with the other apprentices was great, I would do that enough at school. But when I was on the job I wanted to be near the journeyman because they would just start talking amongst themselves and all you do is sit there and listen. And there would just be stories of history. And they may not stand out in my mind, I may not be able to tell you what they are, [00:43:00] but they made me who I am as an electrician. They made my whole perspective on the industry and how the labor movement should be came from a lot of these individuals that I just happened to be around.

And listen to them talk to each other. And they talked about the industry. So the tradition that's important that I think we are bringing back and I think we're bringing it back through different programs that have been initiated from the business manager, Chris Erikson [00:43:30] are important. They're making relevant conversation grow in the industry again. And it's hard, we have 11,000 journeyman it's hard, it's like corralling trying to corral as they say cats, but you still want to speak of relevance. And relevance could be family life, it's part of it. But you have to speak of relevance of the industry, the history of the industry. Tell a story. Tell a story when Harry Van Arsdale was approached [00:44:00] by Mayor Beame ... no who was he approached by? I'm going to forget who the mayor was, maybe it was Lindsey. Maybe it was an earlier mayor. But he was approached to help organize the boy scouts in Manhattan. And an older guy Paul [inaudible 00:44:15] tells the story the best. He told me this story. And it just was, so Harry sends two of his guys, his guys that always answer his call, which there was many.

"Go down and organize the boy scouts, I got a call from [00:44:30] the mayor and it's time we get them off the streets."

Jaime: [That's some pressure 00:44:32]

Cornelius: I was fortunate enough to have Harry [Van Arsdale 00:44:37] Jr. speak at my apprentice meetings for two years before he died. And he was, "you go down and organize, get the kids off the street and bring them into the boy scouts." And it's just a funny story because ... and it's not. I don't know how much I want recorded, but it was just one of those things where that was when labor was really close with the politicians in the [00:45:00] city. You had the mayor speaking to the business manager of Local 3 saying we need to organize these kids on the street that are running around wild, lets get them into the boy scouts and Harry was like that's just what we're gonna do.

And he put two guys that were probably shop stewards or business representatives and he sent them out there, and these guys went out on the street with a team of their shop stewards maybe and they started to corral these kids and get them in and bring them into the boy scouts and there was a lot of resistance there. These kids, they were street toughs. They don't want to hear from these guys that come around say you've got [00:45:30] to join the boy scouts. They would tell them to hit the road. That was the funny part of the story, so Harry has to go down there and straighten it out himself. And just... but I think the take away from the story is that just to repeat myself, we were *that* close. We were that close to city hall at one time. Why aren't we there now, what happened along the way? And there's a lot of things that happened along the way.

But it should make people think. Make people think so there is a history, there is a history [00:46:00] of Local 3, history of the labor movement that is not just that we're pushing a large boulder up the hill that seems to be growing. There was just a time when we were held in higher regard. And for a young person to hear that you know I won't go too far on this point, it's very easy to see, very [inaudible 00:46:20] but when there's a war and the two sides fight each other, aside from times that are pointed out in history as humanitarian [00:46:30] arrangements, one side tries to vanquish the other and destroy their history. And that's what happening in the middle east. You're seeing that ISIS is destroying these edifices that are thousands of years old and you're destroying that culture's history. And once you don't have history what do you have?

And I think that's what, and I am going to go off a little bit here, but I think that's what happens in the united states with the races. I think that the black culture [00:47:00] we need to talk more about their history. It's deserved. It's deserved for everyone to have a heritage and for it to be discussed and if your heritage is only about slavery there's gonna be frustrations. There is a lot of good well educated people that the history books don't talk about, and it needs to be spoken about. You need to have a proud history. So I think the tradition of Local 3 is passing on [00:47:30] knowledge of job stories of fishing trip that one of the clubs went on. These are things that create history. The sportsman club is gonna have their 30th anniversary party this Friday. This week we were out at Santorini and at the end of Sunday before we were leaving started going through some of the photographs and there's your history.

You look at the photographs, you laugh and you see who is this and who looked like this at that date and who looked like that and who [00:48:00] changed this much, and then you say look at all the stuff the club did. There were fishing trips there were blood drives there was the night out on crime there was the street fair, there was bayberry, Santorini and we had a history. And that's what needs to be, that's what I try to talk to the younger people about. And even the journeyman that may have not have been as connected as they were when they were younger. That we have a history and we should know it because this is your career and when you leave you're still dependent [00:48:30] on the working people to carry on. So I think those are two important aspects of our industry that can't be let go.

Jaime: Speaking about Van Arsdale [00:48:40] and you had the luxury to have heard him speak. What was one of his favorite things or one of his most impactful things that he used to say to the apprentices or to people in general?

Cornelius: At the time when I came in, it was my first introduction to [Van Arsdale 00:48:59] [00:49:00] so everything he said I was looking at a labor leader that and I'll be honest, he was cut, he was built like a labor leader that was in the history books that I read in college. Because high school history is not anything like college history. It's completely different. So here's a man and I said well here is the living flesh of someone I read about you know? And he stood at that podium, and as far as him there's [00:49:30] not one thing he said, we have his bust and the price of good unionism is eternal vigilance. We'll always stand out in everyone's mind. But I'll tell you that when he spoke at every apprentice meeting. And when he'd begin to speak he'd start talking and he talked to us about the importance of everything.

It was a character building not a report, but when he'd speak from the podium it was about character building. [00:50:00] And the importance of doing it through the labor movement. And as he'd speak he'd get ... he began and all of a sudden you'd here " Harry, Harry, Harry" and the apprentices would all start in unison go and he would stand there at the podium with his hands on each side of the podium and he would just stop talking and it would build up to a loud pitch and then it would die down again. And he would pick up exactly where he left off. The word that he left off at. It didn't phase him a bit and he'd start, and he'd begin again.

And that [00:50:30] would happen twice a meeting. And it was just impressive because he was the man. That was ... so I think his presence alone spoke more than anyone else that he was someone who had his hand on the pulse of Local 3 whether he was 26 years old or 81... 86 years old when he died. [00:51:00] He was the living embodiment of someone who made a tremendous gift. As did Thomas Van Arsdale and as Chris Erikson, and all the members the unknowns that retire. The unknowns that put their time in, even the rank and file that quietly talk to me after a safety meeting and I know they buy the American car and they wear the American made shoes, and all of a sudden they're wearing a shirt that says [00:51:30] a symbol on it that is from a union made clothing company. They're the quiet ones. And so I'm off on a tangent now. To remember Harry to me was his presence. I never was able to engage in a one on one with him. But just him being there I think invigorated me. It made me say I'm in the labor movement and [00:52:00] I'm gonna be a part of it.

Jaime: In the future do you think your children, I'm sorry not your children but other members of the community are gonna be doing your type of work?

Cornelius: Technology is moving quickly into automation. Every [00:52:30] ..yearly I'll put in on an annual basis, new products come out that take some of the skill away from our industry and by far ...no argument there. Construction because it is not a cut and dried profession there are alterations along the way. The best laid plans need adjustment, need changes, [00:53:00] so we're not at a point where automation is going to end the profession. Obviously more factory style work that's automated, you can see everything can be built with robots in a factory. Construction is difficult. There's still logistics there that getting a robot into the site is to me an extreme ...

But yes, for a time our job will [00:53:30] still be performed by future generations but again, to be very clear we can't fool ourselves. Artificial intelligence and automation are just robotics are moving in. And the smallest innovations in our industry and I won't say that it is taking some of our skill away, without a doubt. And I hope that that doesn't demoralize the worker, [00:54:00] but it tends to. It absolutely tends to.

Let's say someone young is coming in and they're coming into what? The reputation of Local 3 and being an electrician. And as you progress in your career, there's more innovation that comes in and they're coming, that's coming closer to you taking away the skills that you're learning. So as you're learning something you're watching that skill being unnecessary anymore. And that can be demoralizing to the individual to the soul. [00:54:30] It can add a lot of stress. Is that an answer?

Jaime: It's actually a lot. It's a lot to unpack as well. This is something that we always think about. I think it's something that needs a lot more attention, this technology introduction, de skilling and demoralization of the worker, definitely. I want to keep this very personal to you and your life [00:55:00] for as much time as we have left. I know that education has been a big role in your life. I met you I think in a college class ...

Cornelius: Yes.

Jaime: That we were taking together. I'm not sure if you remember which one it was but it is always nice to spend time with you in that setting. Can you tell us about your experience in college?

Cornelius: If it wasn't for my wife I wouldn't have returned. I wanted to, but I don't think I would have [00:55:30] and she was the encouraging factor there. My experience, and should I talk about prior college or really the latest ...

Jaime: Whatever you want.

Cornelius: I will say this, when I went into college before Local 3, it was difficult for me in a sense that I wasn't sure where the education would take me. I didn't look ahead to see what I wanted to be. You know and I think that's the importance of our liberal arts in education. You can go in and [00:56:00] there's no rush to get to your degree in a sense

that, or define a profession. You should be able to search around. And I was all ready focusing on political science, where was that gonna take me, I don't know maybe to law school, maybe to be a teacher of some sort. I was also looking at health, but I wasn't going to go into the medical field and that was maybe a preliminary education for that.

So it was a good education but it was without true focus for me personally. But I stayed [00:56:30] with it and Local 3 came and I said I can be a part of the labor movement and I can go to school. So to me that was more tangible. I was going to go to work, I know I'd have a trade, but I was going to have an education too so I could build on that. So I could have a trade and build on that education any time. And that takes me to almost the present time where I went back to school to finish my bachelors at about 40 and it was a calling. Absolutely it was a calling. [00:57:00] And the experience I think wouldn't have been as pleasurable if I had gone back earlier.

The people I met at that time and I will say you included Jamie especially, to see what you're doing now with this is ultra impressive. When we walked into the classroom it was interesting to see the people that were in my class. When we all went back, none of us had talked about it we all knew each other, we were all fairly active people. And at least for me when I walked in I was surprised everybody that was in there and I was pleasantly [00:57:30] surprised at everyone who was in that room and that educational experience was good because I was at a point in my life as a shop steward where this was going to improve my skills at conveying labors message. And that's all I wanted to do.

And I don't want to sound high and mighty or profound. I don't even find the words of thinking highly of myself [00:58:00] to have that skill. But I knew it was gonna help me and I knew that was what I wanted to do as a shop steward. So the schooling itself, I tell everybody you're reading books and you're writing papers. It's not like you can read the book and maybe fade away for five pages. You have this main focus, this comprehensive reading you know, and it's text book. There's a lot of information to absorb. And then you're writing about it. The educational experience, [00:58:30] and I do [inaudible 00:58:32] to all the apprentices, I say do your bachelors now. But if I had done my bachelors at an earlier point in my career I can't see it being more enjoyable and meeting the people that I met in this phase of my education.

A better group and that goes from the administrators to obviously all the students who are my friends and I know we don't see each other all the time but [00:59:00] we all have that understanding that we went to school. And we went and we took our education for the labor movement. And we're a part of that elite force. That's my experience. You want to talk about the trip to the ILO? That was a great trip. That was a very very good trip.

Jaime: Went to Switzerland together, [00:59:30] spend some time at the International Labor Organization. Tell us about your experience personally with that.

Cornelius: I couldn't get enough. I could have sat in the ILO hearings all day. And it was hard, because you had to have the headset on and there was different languages, but it was easy in the part that it was all done in English for us, we'd switch the handle to the

English, but you're coming into hearings that had been going on for a while, so you kind of playing a little catch up [01:00:00] but I just ... it was refreshing to see such concern about working people and about human rights. And that's really what it started to come down to it started to really hit me that this is a human rights issue. That's what the ILLO is about. And the trip itself was good, you travel with a group of people that you know or you think you know, and then you get there and you don't know anyone until you live [01:00:30] with them or you spend a week with them, and again it's like your first, I compared that trip to my freshman year of college.

You're with a group of people who are of the same age and going through the same experiences for the first time and for us in that trip to the ILO we were going through this experience together as electricians in Local 3. We're electricians and we're going over experience something all together for the [01:01:00] first time and having the same background. And I think that all of us have that relationship that we take with us forever. It was a great trip, we learned a lot. We had good chaperones we'll call them. We're adults and we had chaperones, but we did right? We had Ann and Tom and that was an interesting relationship between them for a while.

Jaime: Yeah it was a pleasure to share that time with you as well.

Cornelius: Thank you.

Jaime: To make a little transition into [01:01:30] some culminating ideas. What advice would you give somebody starting in your field today?

Cornelius: Will they be starting in the field as organized or unorganized?

Jaime: You make a valid point about separation but I would say as you would like to answer.

Cornelius: Okay.

Jaime: Just for simplification, a first year [01:02:00] apprentice. TA one first year apprentice engaging in local three.

Cornelius: I would really just, education. I would say to them, I had a guy. Here's a story. So I was a first ... education is the key. It is because we're going to be speaking to educated people politicians are all highly educated. Property managers are highly educated. Developers generally are highly educated. If we're going to [01:02:30] sit at the table with these people we need to be able to speak properly, clearly, comprehensively, with organized direction.

So that's what I say to the first year apprentices when they come in. I tell them when you become a third year apprentice and you're ready to kill everyone because you just want to finish this apprenticeship, I say go back and read your books and buckle down harder. Because that's the time. That's the time when things should start to click. You [01:03:00] want to come out of this educationally two things. Electrical jargon, and I say to them not the Home Depot language, not the flip this house TV show language, that's

all poor. I say you want to know electrical trade language. You want to speak like a nerd if you want to use that term. I say and the second thing you want to know is labor history cause labor history is your foundation and it will help you make decisions for the elected officials [01:03:30] that we want to have in office. And that's my usual introduction to every kid I meet, it's those two things I say and remember these two things. Nothing else you can take away from me. Take away these two things. Learn electrical jargon and learn labor history, and you'll be the best electrician sitting in that chair where the foreman is and no one will snowball you and no one will own you. Because otherwise you'll be at the mercy of these contractors.

The story I'll tell, is I was a first year apprentice, and it was a second year apprentice [01:04:00] and this guy a journeyman said kid, you look like you rolled out of a dumpster. This kid's shoes looked like they were worn by the homeless. He didn't wear socks, his pants were ripped. He truly looked like a mess. And here he is giving me advice and I'm looking at him, and he goes on but this is what he said. "School. You have to do your school work." I think his name was Al. I says this is coming from you Al, you do look like you just rolled out of a dumpster. [01:04:30] That doesn't matter. You have to do well in school. I wish there was someone filming this you know, and I took that with me. It was just a set, I was a first year apprentice, very impressionable, he was second year, and he told me school. And it's something I was receptive to, especially coming out of college and going into [inaudible 01:04:48] it was just a funny story, and I can still picture him to this day. I think he was missing teeth. But it was very funny.

Jaime: I only have one more question for you. What [01:05:00] inspires you?

Cornelius: Learning something about someone that's unexpected I guess. In general. And not that I underestimate ... I give everyone a lot of credit and it's just [01:05:30] inspiring to me to see that someone has an attribute that I didn't see right away but it's there. I guess it's successful relationships. It's compromised of two parties that ... and it's true compromise not fake compromise. It's where people come to an understanding that that's the way forward. [01:06:00] That's very inspiring to me cause I just feel that we are in a very polarized society right now.

And if we can reach common agreement I think we go a lot further. And it's not easy. People want to take a stand, people have their values and their views and I get that. But being rigid never accomplishes anything. So when I can see people of difference, [01:06:30] at least try to meet a common goal. You know? And I think that's what's great about the labor movement. Is that we come from all different backgrounds. All different cultures right now. Especially Local 3. Local 3 is the epitome to me at least and maybe I'm biased, but it's the epitome of diversity. And maybe there's room for improvement, maybe you have some issues along the way that are being brought up and maybe they exist and maybe they don't exist as strongly as they are represented and maybe they are. I won't see everything.

[01:07:00] But we have a group of people, when I can sit there and watch three different dialects speak English and not only work on a project but talk about their children and grandchildren. And I had that experience where three different dialects of members in Local 3 and they were older gentleman, I was a young journeyman at the

time and they had to each speak english and they had thick accents from each, and they communicated. [01:07:30] And I think that's inspiring to me. The communication of people and that's it. Differences I do have something I want to add. I don't know if I want it used. Do we have time?

Jaime: Yeah.

Cornelius: I'll keep it really short.

Jaime: No no please.

Cornelius: I just want to tell this story, cause it's not a ... I'm a cancer survivor. I don't always like to talk about it and I will only talk about it in certain conditions. [01:08:00] Because it's not a happy ending for everyone.. for me living was the fortunate part of it. But in 1999, and when I was ... I turned out in 1991 in my first shop. And I was working At Lenox Hill hospital. And I was about 28 years old, and we were doing the OR's on the 10th floor at Lenox Hill hospital. And there was long, there was weekend work. We would go into the hospital, we worked there during the week seven hours and then [01:08:30] on the Friday, Friday would be seven in the morning to 11 at night, Saturday would be seven in the morning to 11 at night, Sunday we'd go on til ten and nine and ten at night. It was grueling on the weekends but I was young and it was a small group of us and we had to do the OR's we had to get in and out and get as much work as you could get done.

It was isolation transformer panels it was getting the in to be able to hold the heavy equipment that would be rolled around in the ceiling during operations so we did all that. And again that was 1991. [01:09:00] In 1997 I was diagnosed with colon cancer. I was living on the upper east side of New York. And I went to the doctor, I picked the doctor out of our magna care plan, he was in the book. His office was around the corner. I was like this is great, I didn't know what I had.

But I had the symptoms, but I didn't understand it. And I was told to go see a gastroenterologist. Found the guy in the care book, [01:09:30] Dr. Bianco, he's still there today. And I said all right I'll just walk around the corner. I walked around the corner, I didn't tell anyone I was going, it was my cousin, his wife cause they're in the medical field I had told them what happened. I was hemorrhaging blood. Anyway, and my sister, my sister went with me, he said you got something going on there, you definitely have something. It ended up having to be within two weeks I was getting scheduled to be in, there was no time to lose, there was a tumor in my large intestine and my colon [01:10:00] that had to be taken immediately. It was about to break the intestinal wall. Well here I am, one of my best friends from Local 3 and my cousin and my mother the morning of the operation. I say good bye to them, and I get on the gurney, and do all the prep. I'm being wheeled down into the elevator. They go tenth floor. I go tenth floor, I'm laying there. So much going through your mind. I wasn't married at the time, totally single. I had a couple nieces and a nephew. [01:10:30] And I'm staring at the calling being wheeled down and I get off and they wheel me out on the tenth floor, and they're wheeling me into the OR and I said, I looked and they're strapping me into the table for the operation, if you've ever been operated on it's very uncomfortable. You are completely susceptible. You can move your fingers. And I'm getting strapped down and

the surgeon's talking to me and I look at her and I go "Doctor [inaudible 01:10:59] I built this [01:11:00] room eight years ago."

And I just think that's a Local 3 story. Again to me it's a Local 3 story because we're ubiquitous and we come around, and that was something that came around very early in my life. I said "Holy cow, I built this." And then the usual when I tell that story... it's usually, oh my god and the place was still standing it didn't [inaudible 01:11:23] I guess so. But it's a story that I don't tell a lot because again [01:11:30] not everyone has a happy ending with cancer. Too many people don't. But in the Local 3 sense to me it was just a very funny coincidence. So I don't even like to tell it Jamie, I really don't.

Jaime: Thank you for sharing.

Cornelius: But I had to get it off my chest.

Jaime: It's a beautiful thing. Listen you were there before it happened and all that equipment that was being pushed around to operate you was by your hand. I think that's a beautiful representation [01:12:00] of the invisible labor at this point in time. [inaudible 01:12:08]